Features Charité Hospital

How Does It Feel to Cut Into a Human Brain?

As anatomical preparator at Charité hospital, Navena Widulin has spent 30 years cutting up cadavers — and she loves her job.

May 29, 2026
Peter Matthews

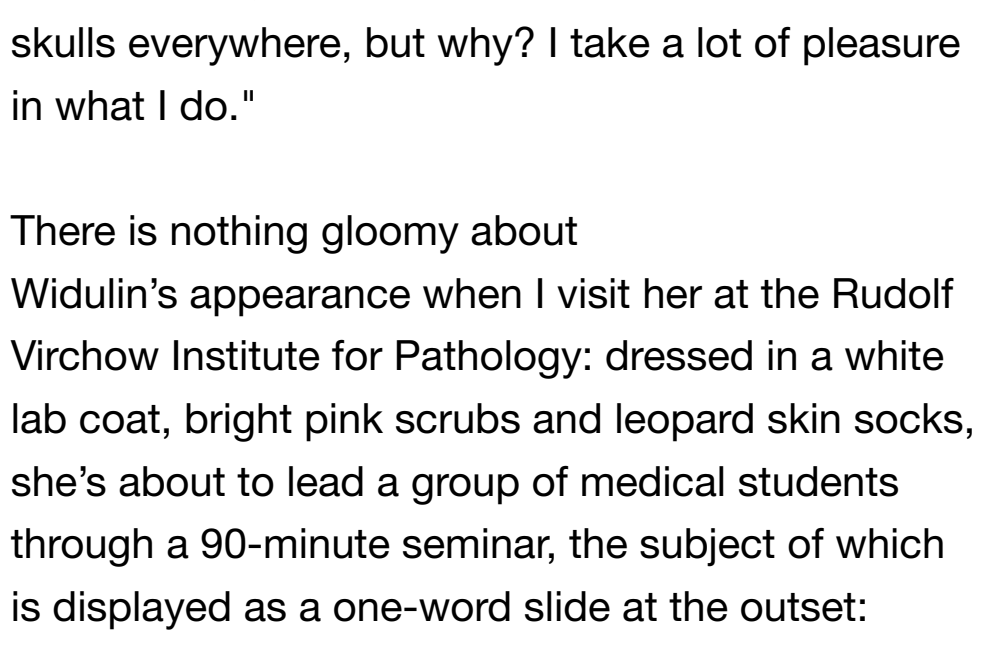

Photo: Ivona Alavanja

"A fresh human brain can be cut into only 10 slices," Navena Widulin explains. "But if you preserve it, it's much easier. Then you can make 20."

For over three decades, Widulin has been preparing and preserving cadavers at Charité research hospital – and she doesn't understand why anyone would doubt that she enjoys it. "They think I've got to be morbid, live in a house with black walls and skulls everywhere, but why? I take a lot of pleasure in what I do."

There is nothing gloomy about Widulin's appearance when I visit her at the Rudolf Virchow Institute for Pathology: dressed in a white lab coat, bright pink scrubs and leopard skin socks, she's about to lead a group of medical students through a 90-minute seminar, the subject of which is displayed as a one-word slide at the outset: *Leichenkonservierung*. Corpse-preservation.

The class takes place in a grand lecture hall just opposite Hauptbahnhof, separated from the central station by the section of water where the Berlin-Spandauer Schifffahrtskanal meets the Spree. Only occasionally, as we pass through the building, through storage rooms, offices and operating theatres, am I able to glimpse some sign of the physical work of the autopsy: the cutting, sawing, slicing, grinding, drilling, puncturing, draining, cleaning and disinfecting.

Briefly, we stop inside one steeply tiered anatomical theatre where the students' seating encircles the cold metal dissection table, allowing close observation of how to carve open a cadaver. A little further on, we pass the elevator that brings the refrigerated dead up from the morgue: a full corpse is lying in the corridor on a gurney under a white sheet, slightly tented at the toes. At the corner of some of the rooms, regular household tools appear possessed with macabre new purpose: a saw; a large chisel; a mallet. But Widulin remains chatty, friendly, accommodating. It's only after she's proudly displayed the institute's electric bone saw that she asks about the class, in an offhand sort of way, "You won't mind, will you, if there are photographs?"

"No," I reply, following her eyes to the pile of handouts she is bringing to the class, some of which show detailed pictures of dead bodies, chopped into grisly sections. "I won't mind."

> *...the physical work of the autopsy: the cutting, sawing, slicing, grinding, drilling, puncturing, draining, cleaning and disinfecting.*

Navena Widulin has worked at the Charité since 1993. First as a *Preparatorin*, then in pathology, and finally at the hospital's medical museum, where she has responsibility for the conservation of the "wet" and "dry" pathological-anatomical specimens, as well as the model and moulage collection. From a young age, she knew she was interested in the functions of the body.

"My father comes from Russia, and our holidays were always in Siberia. Full of survival training. We would catch fish, crabs and frogs and eat them. And he showed me that if you put salt on the severed legs of a frog, they move. They kick, even after they've been dissected. So already back then, I was fascinated."

Today, Widulin divides her time between the hands-on work of teaching medical students how to perform an autopsy and her preservation of the specimens at the medical history museum. She is a pioneer in some little-known fields: not only can she claim to be the only person in the world who continues to make original wax moulages for medical pathologies (an artisanal practice where the symptoms of injury or disease are cast as 3D wax models), but she's also got the world's largest collection of gallstones. In her office, drawer after drawer is filled with them: little coloured pebbles formed in the bodies of over 3,000 different individuals, discovered following the surgical removal of the gallbladder.

"I think they're beautiful," she explains, combing through her drawers. "I wash them, I dry them and I inventory them. When I started, I would count them each individually, but now I don't have the time. If I did, I think I would get the world record. Look," she says, holding up a cracked white shaped stone with a shimmering black interior. "This is my favourite. It's pure cholesterol. From the outside it's very boring. But [on] the inside, doesn't it look like a gemstone?"

Photo: Ivona Alavanja

Widulin's enthusiasm is apparent in the classroom, too. With the light leaking in through the large rose window of the pathology institute's seminar room, she outlines the exact recipe of liquid to inject into a corpse for anatomical preservation (depending on the size of the corpse, 10 to 15 litres of a mixture containing ethanol, glycerin or karion, distilled water, formaldehyde solution, and disinfectant). A quote from Luther's Bible is inscribed above the large arched vaulted recess: "*Tod, wo ist dein Stachel? Hölle, wo ist dein Sieg?*" – "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?".

The class is informative, practical, and blood-curdling. In 90 minutes, she explains everything from the different historical and cultural ways of preserving a body to how to identify and cut into its main artery to pour in the preserving solution (at this stage, she explains, it's perfectly normal for the hands to expand, the fists uncurling slightly as the veins fill up with fluid.)

And then there come the photos: a head with the skull cap cut away and the brain cavity emptied out; a hunk of human leg in a sink, next to a handsaw; a wrinkled corpse—everything missing below the ribcage—whose long arms hang off the worktable; two photographs of a different severed head, from above and below. From below, the neck sewn up like a purse. From above, a man's head stares out at the camera from a Tupperware container, bloody-nosed, through five inches of orange water.

When the seminar ends, we retire back to Widulin's office to talk, and I notice a little single-panelled cartoon stuck to one wall. It shows a morgue, with one open tray, and an attendant walking out with the legs of one of the deceased draped over their shoulders. *Everyone steals from work,* reads the caption.

I ask Widulin what might happen if I donated my body to the medical students here at the Charité. How would they make use of me, piece by piece?

"First of all, any incoming body donor at the anatomy department at the Charité hospital is examined by a pathologist to see if they died of natural causes. If the pathologist says, 'Yes, everything is fine' – and if they've checked some other factors, [like] if you're over overweight, and if you haven't yet undergone autolysis, meaning no decomposition of the cells has begun, then you're suitable. This means your body will be preserved for the next 18 months to two years. A solution is then introduced through your arteries which makes your body tissue last longer so that the medical students can dissect everything. They'll open you up and study your muscles, bones, nerves, and blood vessels. Dissect the individual organs. Maybe even your eyes.

Photo: Ivona Alavanja

"You see, medical students and doctors need to practice new surgical techniques. Because you simply can't try something out on living people, and you want to learn. So that's what the body donors are for: not just demonstrating human anatomy but also learning new procedures. For example, in cosmetic surgery, if you want to learn how to inject Botox, the vessels in the face have lots of variations. It changes person to person. A vein or a system of blood vessels might go this way on one person, and that way on another. So they'll try it out using coloured material. Of course, it doesn't spread exactly the same on someone who is deceased as it would on a living person, but it does spread, and then you can dissect it all to see how it flows together. And so, there are great learning opportunities which are only possible in this field."

And after that? What happens after those two years?

"After two years? Your skin is gone. Your muscles are gone. After this time, we've completely dissected every anatomical structure of the body. So then, we do a little ceremony. It's quite moving, really. Once the dissection course ends, we'll gather everything together that we've taken apart, and it's all [re]assembled. The body parts of each person are gathered up and laid to rest. There's a big memorial service, and all the relatives come. It can fill a huge room – and all the students who've dissected these donors conduct the service: [they] read the names, they speak, they sing, and there's music. It's really like a belated funeral, two years on."

Widulin's office is brimming with wonders, its cabinets and shelves carefully stacked with human specimens, animal specimens and detailed casts of wax moulage. "Look at this," Widulin says and after struggling with the lid of one transparent tub – 'for the *Vorführeffekt*', she jokes, building up the suspense – she proudly displays several chalky rocks: these are 700 grams of bladderstones, removed from the body of single patient who died of an unrelated heart attack. "*Sehr beeindruckend!*" – very impressive, she says, "*und extrem selten*." But her curiosities are not limited to humankind. One jar is filled with what appear to be baby rats, preserved in liquid "All caught by my dog, last summer".

Photo: Ivona Alavanja

Opening another drawer, she brings out an organ whose vivid veins are preserved in red and blue, and asks if I can guess what it is. A stomach? I offer. A distended heart? "No," she says. "It's my placenta. Mine and my son's. I tried to present it to him as a gift, but he wasn't interested." Widulin pauses, a little mystified that anyone would fail to share her enthusiasm for such a powerful organ. "Of course, I couldn't work on it straight after the birth. I was busy. But I made sure that the father of my son kept it in some Tupperware."

> *We were working together, cutting open a body, and he stopped and said 'Oh, poor Aunty'. And then I realised: it was his relative.*

When it comes to internal organs, Widulin can tell you what it feels like to cut into each of them, including the human brain ("soft, but not spongy"), and catalog them by how they run through her fingers. "My favourite? The human intestine. Very big, and completely underrated. When you open a cadaver and see the intestine, everything is perfectly formed. It's a great miracle: its structure; the mucous membrane, how beautifully ridged it is, and its colouration. I personally find it very aesthetic, very very beautiful."

This fascination with the functions and malfunctions of the body might appear endless, but even Navena Widulin has limits. For instance, she has never performed an autopsy on someone she knew personally. "My colleague did that," she explains. "We were working together, cutting open a body, and he stopped and said 'Oh, poor Aunty'. And then I realised: it was his relative. I could never."

If she had more time, Widulin would like to give more of her attention to making medical moulage, keeping alive a once-ubiquitous practice that was phased out with the rise of colour photography. She shows off a finished work: a human hand with lacerated fingers. "Can you guess what happened?" she asks.

I look carefully at the sculpted wax hand, slightly larger than my own. "A workplace accident?"

"No," says Widulin, smiling broadly. "It's a murder. A knife attack. I made this specimen from the victim so that it can be shown to students of forensics."

"So, this person was held here? These are his defensive wounds?"

She nods. "Active defensive injuries. 'Active' means you intervene. He's reached out to grab the knife. Purely defensive wounds would appear more like on the arms, as you try to protect yourself."

Before I leave, Widulin gives me a tour of the cellars, the storage rooms for the "wet" historical specimens, collected by the founder of the Charité, Rudolf Virchow. Shelf after shelf of bleached white lumps in yellowing alcohol, each internal organ precisely dissected to better display the symptoms of disease. "He was a maniac collector," Widulin explains. "As a pathologist, he wanted as many examples as possible in order to show the exact development of disease, from beginning to end and all the stages in between. Before the war, we had something like 35,000 specimens here at Charité. After the bombs, maybe 2,000 were left. But they collected again in the 50s and 60s. So we're back up to around 10,000 now."

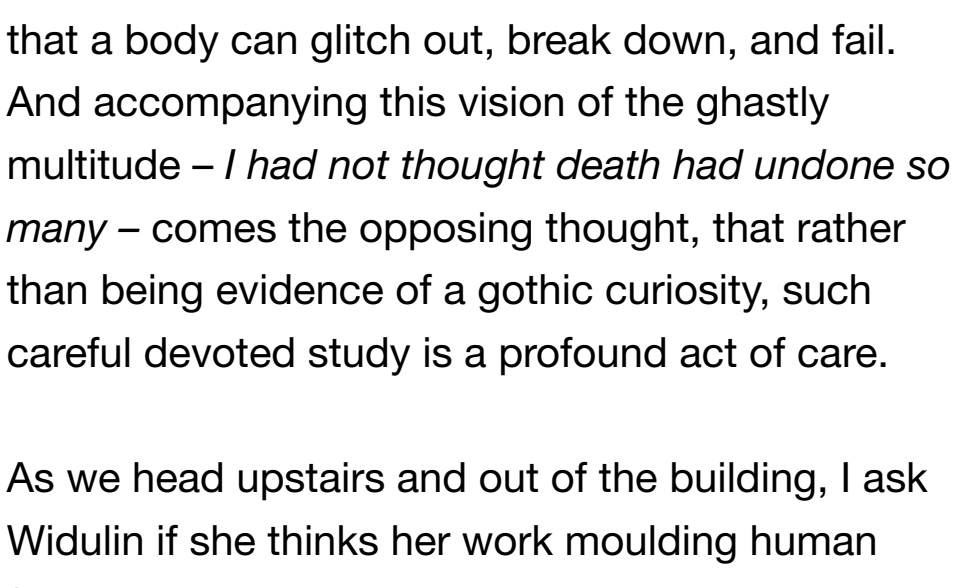

Photo: Ivona Alavanja

Passing through these storage rooms brimming with thousands of corrupted internal organs, I begin to think about how much material is stored here, the accumulated products of so many bodies. These bleached-white brains and guts and kidneys in the cellars, the hundreds of dead bodies being kept cool in the morgue, the thousands upon thousands of gallstones and bladderstones in the drawers of the office, the casts taken from diseased eyes, arthritic fingers; the cirrhotic livers, the blood clots, the tumours: all the various ways that a body can glitch out, break down, and fail. And accompanying this vision of the ghastly multitude – *I had not thought death had undone so many* – comes the opposing thought, that rather than being evidence of a gothic curiosity, such careful devoted study is a profound act of care.

As we head upstairs and out of the building, I ask Widulin if she thinks her work moulding human features in wax had changed the way she sees other people's bodies, "When you're out in the city, at the supermarket, and you notice something remarkable: an interesting nose, a missing finger. Do you ever think: 'I'd like that one for my collection.'?"

Widulin smiles. "Yes," she says. "I do."

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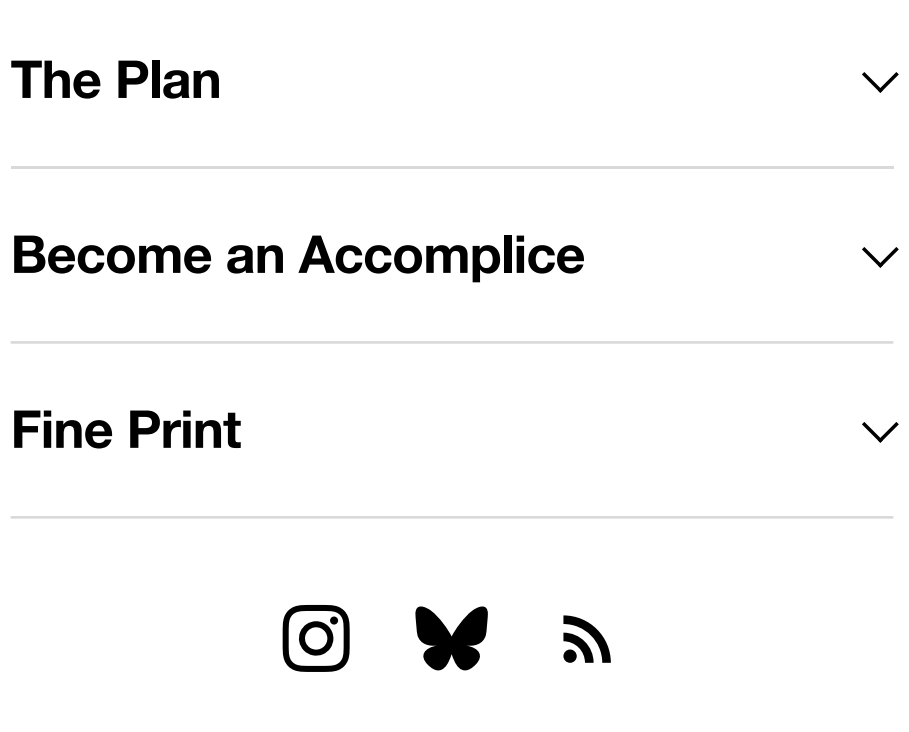

Weekend

What are you up to this weekend?

We cast our eye across Berlin to provide a short round-up of what's going on from Thursday May 28 to Sunday May 31.

May 27, 2026

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